DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF THE ARMY (CIVIL WORKS)

COMPLETE STATEMENT
OF

HONORABLE JOHN PAUL WOODLEY, JR
ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF THE ARMY (CIVIL WORKS)

BEFORE THE

Subcommittee on Water Resources and Environment
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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MR. CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE:

Introduction

I am John Paul Woodley, Jr., Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works. I am pleased to appear today with Lieutenant General Carl Strock, Chief of Engineers, to discuss the role of the Department of the Army and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in reconstruction efforts that lie ahead for the Gulf Coast.

The Corps' Future Role in the Disaster Area

The Administration stands ready to work with local and state officials as they plan for the rebuilding of New Orleans, parishes in Southern Louisiana, Mississippi and other parts of the Gulf Coast. As we know, New Orleans has a particular challenge because much of the city lies below sea level. Protecting the City has never been easy. Thorough analysis, much thoughtful consideration of alternatives and careful attention as to how best integrate future protection objectives with one another and with the coastal wetlands ecosystem will guide future consideration and decision making, to be sure. The President has pledged the support of the Corps of Engineers to work with the State, City, and Parish officials to make the flood protection system stronger and these local officials will have a large part in the engineering decisions to come because they will be the project sponsors and partners.

Need to Reconstruct Storm Damaged Hurricane and Flood Protection Features

However, our first and most urgent need is to assess the performance of the hurricane protection projects in place at the time of the Katrina and Rita storm

events. We will use these findings to ensure that restoration plans for existing hurricane protection features are technically sound, will have efficacy and can be accomplished in a way that is environmentally acceptable. Information developed by forensic information and from performance assessments must be available in time to be integrated into the design, engineering and reconstruction of existing hurricane and flood protection feature for New Orleans that is to be completed before the beginning of next year's hurricane season.

Indeed, the Corps is already hard at work in this regard, having established an Interagency Performance Evaluation Task Force (IPET) to collect and assess information that can inform decisions to reconstruct existing authorized structures. Also, an independent team from the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) is already collecting information to apply to the development of design criteria for these features. Other organizations and individuals are doing important work in this regard, as well. To the extent practicable, all relevant data will be carefully considered and objectively assessed as the Corps makes the immediate decisions necessary for reconstructing the features damaged by the storm events. Working with other Federal partners, such as FEMA, we will evaluate all information to ensure the appropriate level of flood protection and rebuilding activities.

In addition, the Secretary of Defense has directed the Secretary of the Army to convene a panel of experts under the auspicies of the National Academies of Science (NAS) to evaluate the information collected and developed by the IPET and other parties so as to provide an independent and peer reviewed assessment of the performance of the hurricane protection systems in New Orleans and the surrounding areas.

The NAS will assemble an independent multidisciplinary panel of acknowledged national and international experts from the public and private sectors and academia. This National Academies panel is to be drawn from the membership of the National Academy of Sciences and the National Academy of Engineering. This panel will issue a final set of findings based primarily on the forensic data gathered by the Interagency Performance Evaluation Task Force and the American Society of Civil Engineers Independent Review Panel, and will draw upon information and assessments provided by other sources.

The National Academies will report directly to me. The NAS study is expected to take approximately eight months to complete. All reports generated by these panels will be made available to Congress and to the public, of course.

While the forensic analysis may recommend ways to improve the performance of the hurricane protection system at the currently authorized level of protection, more analysis and a broader range of considerations are required to determine how to best increase levels of protection for the City of New Orleans and surrounding parishes.

The Corps of Engineers, in collaboration with FEMA, will be an integral member of the close federal partnership with the states of Louisiana and Mississippi, the city of New Orleans, and other Gulf Coast cities, parishes and counties. The Corps stands ready to provide advice to assist their rebuilding in a way that provides full consideration of all relevant factors. The President has pledged that Federal funds will cover a large measure of the costs of repairing public infrastructure in the disaster zones, from roads and bridges to schools and water systems. If called upon, Corps of Engineers stands ready to execute a broad array of engineering, construction and contract management services.

The coastal wetlands ecosystem can provide a buffer against the impacts of some storms. The coastal wetlands are the literal, figurative and conceptual foundation upon which future potential hurricane, flood protection and other development infrastructure must be integrated. The Administration is working with Congress and the State of Louisiana to develop an appropriate, generic authorization for the Louisiana Coastal Area Ecosystem Protection and Restoration Program that will expedite the approval process for projects and their implementation while providing greater flexibility in setting future priorities and increased opportunities for application of adaptive management decision making. Such an integrated, programmatic approach to coastal wetlands protection and restoration is essential for efficiency and efficacy. This same approach should be considered in a process that allows for a holistic solution to the challenges presented in New Orleans and coastal Louisiana.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I look forward to working with you and the Ranking member and other Subcommittee members on matters of mutual interest and concern. Following Lieutenant General Strock's statement, I would be pleased to answer any questions you or the other Subcommittee members may have.